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‘Another Day Off’: Little Patriotic Fervor as Moscow Puts on Russia Day Festivities

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The crowd at a Russia Day concert on Red Square in Moscow. **Vyacheslav Prokofiev / TASS**

MOSCOW — Russia marked its Russia Day holiday on Monday with widespread state-organized celebrations — but for many, the holiday is just another day off rather than a patriotic event, Muscovites who spoke with The Moscow Times said.

Observed every year on June 12, Russia Day commemorates when the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic first declared state sovereignty in 1990.

“For me, it’s a holiday of bureaucracy,” one Muscovite said, asking to remain anonymous. “I never thought it was a day that brings people together.”

“People are happy that there is another day off,” another woman told The Moscow Times.

In Moscow, city authorities organized over 100 concerts and festivities in parks, including firework shows across the city. Billboards displaying the words “Russia Day” and Russian tricolor flags were also erected across the capital.

Concert celebrations on Red Square also attracted thousands of people on Sunday and Monday, featuring popular Russian singers and public figures including pro-Kremlin singer Shaman and the band Lyube, which is believed to be Russian President Vladimir Putin's favorite band.

However, some people in the crowd were forced to join the celebrations, according to one state employee who was instructed to attend the concert.

Similar festivities were held across the country.

“We always celebrate because this is my home, my homeland,” Natalia Buslaeva, a resident of Vladivostok in the Far East, told the state-run Rossia 1 television channel, adding that “Russia Day is a significant holiday for us.”

To mark Russia Day, President Vladimir Putin presented medals to “Heroes of Russia” at a Monday ceremony at the Kremlin.

“This public holiday marks the inseparability of our centuries-old history, the greatness and glory of the Fatherland, and affirms the unity of our multinational people,” Putin said in a televised speech.

“Today, in a difficult time for the Russian Federation, they unite our society even more, stronger, and serve as a reliable support for our heroes, participants of the special military operation,” he said, referring to the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine.

Later on Monday, Putin visited a Moscow hospital where Russian servicemen who fought in Ukraine are being treated.

Russia’s Defense Ministry posted a video to commemorate the holiday that shows Russian soldiers in the war zone praising their country.

“I’m Russian and I'm lucky,” one serviceman can be seen saying in the video clip.

This year, the holiday was not only celebrated in Russia itself — but also in Russian-occupied towns and cities in Ukraine which Moscow claims to have annexed.

In the eastern Ukrainian Donetsk region, pro-Kremlin authorities handed Russian passports to 35 locals in a ceremony titled “We are citizens of Russia.” Yet other festivities were canceled due to the high risk of shelling by Ukraine’s military, the state-run RIA Novosti news agency reported.

In the neighboring Luhansk region, local pro-Russian authorities held a small ceremony and raised the Russian flag. “So that you live our country in harmony, peace and prospering,” a voice said in a video.

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In the occupied city of Melitopol in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region, local pro-Kremlin authorities also displayed a banner reading "Russia Day. Zaporizhzhia region."

But for Russians who oppose the war in Ukraine, Russia Day is a grim reminder of their country's war against neighboring Ukraine.

In Moscow, street artist Philippenzo unveiled his latest graffiti work "Izrossilovaniye" — a portmanteau of the Russian words for "rape" and "Russia" — an apparent reference to the country's domestic political repressions and the invasion of Ukraine.

City workers painted over the graffiti soon after.

"In the 1990s, when this day was established, we hoped that Russia would be a truly democratic state. Now this day looks like a joke," one woman told The Moscow Times.

"It's scary to think about what the future holds for the country," another Muscovite said.

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